Lesson Plan:
Introduction to Religion in American Society and Government

Objective:

Students will understand the centrality of religion in the lives of many Americans and the ways in which religious beliefs shape political and social views of many citizens. They will recognize that in a nation of some 3,000 religious groups, we will have to learn to live together without religious consensus, adhering to principles of religious liberty in the First Amendment.

Kentucky Academic Expectations:

Historical perspective: examine the impact of significant individuals and groups
Culture and society: explore how people and cultures of many countries, races, and religious traditions have contributed to the American experience.
Government: analyze the importance of rights and responsibilities in a democratic society.

Context:

If a teacher decides to teach the lessons as a unit, this would be an appropriate first lesson. The lesson could also be a way of bringing to present and to the local community learning about the role of religion in the nineteenth century United States. Or the lesson could be used in connection with a unit on world religions, again to relate to local community.

Materials:

newspapers, handout on Williamsburg Charter

Procedure:

Opening Activity on Local Community Religious Organizations

Provide copies of recent local newspapers (some which include religion section) and ask students to work in pairs to find articles, letters, church announcements, etc which relate to religion.

As students share what they find, make lists on board of issues and events which relate to religious beliefs and religious groups. Issues could include such hot-button topics as abortion, homosexuality, the role of women, and prayer in schools. The teacher may want to collect articles for some time to ensure a comprehensive selection. For example, the December 2, 2000 Lexington Herald Leader religion page had articles on the dedication of a Hindu religious and cultural center and an explanation of Ramadan, the month of fasting for Muslims which had begun that month. For the purposes of this lesson, it isn't necessary to discuss the issues. The focus is on helping students see how beliefs and groups influence issues. Encourage students to use their own knowledge and experience to name events and organizations sponsored and/or housed by religious groups, such as schools, fairs, food banks, youth basketball, Scouts.

Ask students if they can think of ways different religions cooperate on occasions (perhaps a Thanksgiving service) or in organizations (the National Conference/NCCJ or the Kentucky Council of Churches). Ask students to suggest both commonalities and differences among religious beliefs. Encourage students to learn from each other beyond the classroom.

At conclusion of discussion, teacher can summarize the role of religion in he community. If students have not mentioned from newspapers or discussion the entire range of religious organizations or issues in the community, teacher should do so. If the community's religious

pluralism does not extend beyond Christianity and perhaps Judaism, teacher should be sure to mention other religions, noting that the expanding pluralism in the U.S. now includes a growing number of people from all the world's religions, especially Islam and Buddhism (for instance, there are as many Muslims as Presbyterians) and also the nearly 12% of Americans who express no religious preference at all.

Teacher should also note that coverage of religion in the newspapers doubled in the 1990's, but that coverage was more political than spiritual. In terms of frequency of coverage, the Center for Media and Public Affairs found Protestants were covered most frequently (38%), then Catholicism (28%), Judaism (12%), Islam (3%), and eastern religions (2%).

Responding to Religion in the Context of Religious Diversity -- Reading/Discussion and Lecture/Discussion:

Note to teacher: Talking about responding to religious diversity can be very difficult. Teachers need to know how they feel and to know their students well. Sometimes it is easier to talk about religious diversity in terms of the first amendment right of freedom to worship than to talk about how we understand religious differences. So some teachers may want to use only the Williamsburg Charter, while others may want to use the quotation from Eck as well.

I. Teacher can ask students to individually make quick lists of similarities (such as school, community, state, nation) and differences (gender, ethnicity, religion, economic class) among themselves and then make point that religion is one of the differences.

2. The question: How can we respond to religious diversity?

Ask students to read the handout with excerpts from the Williamsburg Charter.

Discuss as a class what students think rights and responsibilities mean in this charter and how they relate to religion in their school and community, state, and nation. Why is religious liberty or freedom of conscience at the heart of what it means to be an American citizen? How does the principle of religious liberty help us live together, even though we have deep religious differences.

3. Teacher can read the following to students:

Religion scholar Diana Eck is a professor of comparative religion and Indian Studies at Harvard University. She directs the Pluralism Project which seeks to map the new religious diversity of the U.S., especially the increasing Hindu, Buddhist, and Muslim communities, and she has led a summer institute for teachers. She is a Christian (a Methodist) and was involved in the interfaith dialogue program of the World Council for Churches for fifteen years. In her book, *Encountering God* , she writes:

> The question of religious difference elicits a variety of responses. A collection of Gandhi's writings on religion is published under the title *All Religions are True*, and that assertion is certainly one way of responding to difference. At the other end of the spectrum, there are those that assert that all religions are false and are fundamentally misguided -- look at the wars and violence, the atrocities perpetrated in the name of God. A third option is to insist that one religion is true and the rest are false. Or one might claim that one religion is true and the others are partially true. Most of us have operative ideas about the diversity of religious traditions that fall somewhere along this spectrum. We carry these ideas along with us as we encounter people whose religious faith is different from ours.

Then Eck describes three possible responses in more detail:

> First, there is the exclusivist response: Our own community, our tradition, our understanding of reality, our encounter with God, is the one and only truth, excluding all others.
>
> Second, there is the inclusivist response: here are, indeed many communities, traditions, truths, but our own way of seeing things is the culmination of the others, superior to the others, or at least wide enough to include the others under our universal canopy and in our own terms.
>
> A third response is that of the pluralist: Truth is not the exclusive or inclusive possession of any one tradition or community. Therefore, the diversity of communities, traditions, understandings of the truth, and visions of God is not an obstacle for us to overcome, but an opportunity for our energetic engagement and dialogue with one another. It does not mean giving up our commitments; rather it means opening up those commitments to the give-and-take of mutual discovery, understanding, and, indeed, transformation.

Discussion here may go beyond the community to the world. Students can ask questions about the different responses, but should not be asked to make personal responses about their own beliefs.

Assessment: None is needed since this is an introductory, exploratory lesson.

Handout 1: Excerpts from the Williamburg Charter

The Williamsburg Charter was drafted by members of America's leading faiths and revised over the course of two years in close consultation with political, academic, educational, and religious leaders. It was signed in 1988 by former presidents Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter, the two living chief justices of the United States, and by nearly 200 leaders of national life. With their signatures, these individuals strongly reaffirmed the principles of religious liberty as essential for developing a common vision for a common good. The Williamsburg Charter states in part:

> We affirm that a right for one is a right for another and a responsibility for all. A right for a Protestant is a right for an Eastern Orthodox is a right for a Catholic is a right for a Jew is a right for Humanist is a right for a Mormon is a right for a Muslim is a right for a Buddhist -- and for the followers of any other faith within the wide bounds of the republic.
>
> That rights are universal and responsibilities mutual is both the premise and the promise of democratic pluralism. The First Amendment in this sense, is the epitome of public justice and serves as the golden rule for civic life. Rights and best guarded and responsibilities best exercised when each person and group guards for all others those rights they wish guarded for themselves.

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